

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334124291>

Non-human Agencies in Don DeLillo's White Noise [Published Conference Presentation]

Article · June 2019

DOI: 10.17719/jisr.2019.3328

CITATIONS

0

READS

119

1 author:



Erden El

7 PUBLICATIONS 0 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



NON-HUMAN AGENCIES IN DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE* *

Erden EL **

Abstract

White Noise can be considered an early example of the material turn in literature. Throughout the novel, material agency surpasses human agency, and material forces shape the story. This paper intends to reveal how non-human agencies shape the everyday events in *White Noise* and that an attempt to control material agency and believing that human agency is superior to the non-human leads to frustration and catastrophe. There has been a paradigm shift in humanities from the "linguistic turn" to the "material turn." The discontents of the linguistic turn have necessitated such a change in attitude. The drawback of the linguistic turn was to detach "matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism" (Bennett, 2010, 3). However, *White Noise* (1984), which was written at the time of the paradigm shift, sets the non-human matter back into focus. The environmental catastrophes happen regardless of and independent from human agencies, and the futile effort to control material agencies, believing that human agency possesses more knowledge, end in frustration throughout the novel. A good example of the misconception of human superiority is Jack Gladney, the main character. He believes that he as a college professor and an elite person will not be affected by disasters because disasters happen only to poor people. However, things happen autonomously, independent from and indifferent to human will. Therefore, *White Noise* is a significant work which demonstrates the importance of the non-human agencies and the ways in which they shape the process of events. Thus, this paper intends to reveal that non-human agencies are more effective than human agencies in *White Noise*. In conclusion, *White Noise* demonstrates how the material agency can play an active role in determining events, creating stories and bearing results. Therefore, the agentic capacity of the matter should never be ignored. The novel demonstrates that idea that human beings are superior and have the power to make things happen can lead human beings to frustration just as it did to Jack Gladney. Thus, this presentation will show by examining *White Noise* that the material agency is unpredictable and cannot be taken under control.

Keywords: Linguistic turn, Material turn, Material Agency, Transcorporeality, Agency.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will argue that non-human agencies surpass human agencies in *White Noise*. For this argument, the study will use the recent theory named "trans-corporeality." Trans-corporeality is a new concept and is emblematic of new materialism. The term trans-corporeality was coined by Stacy Alaimo and explains the interconnected structure of all bodies in nature and the ways in which they intermingle. Trans-corporeality stands for the interconnection among all bodies in existence and by bodies, Alaimo means anything that exists, not necessarily human or animal but plants, stones, mountains and of course, toxic materials. Transcorporeality stands for the interconnected structure of bodies "in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" and it also "underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment." (Alaimo, 2010, 2). Therefore, the artificial distinction between the human world and the non-human world is not rational and attention must be paid that human beings are only part of nature. *White Noise* is a good example which shows the idea of the superiority of human beings is a fallacy and it turns out in the novel that material agencies are predominant in human lives and human beings may sometimes be unable to control events. Therefore, this study has chosen *White Noise* to examine in terms of trans-corporeality and intends to reveal how the material world is in connection with the human world. According to Alaimo, "trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures" (2011, 2). What Alaimo has called the interchanges and interconnections are apparent in *White Noise* and this paper will discuss the interchanges among human and material bodies.

2. A BRIEF SUMMARY OF *WHITE NOISE*

White Noise depicts the story of Jack Gladney, who is a professor at the College-on-the-Hill as the head of Hitler Studies. Gladney is married to Babette, and they live together with their children from their earlier

* This paper was presented at "Tracing Non-Human Agency in Literatures in English" Conference on 15.11.2018-17.11. 2018, at Heinrich Heine-University Düsseldorf, Germany.

** Ph.D. Student, Hacettepe University, Department of American Culture and Literature, erdenel@hotmail.com



marriages. Their children are named Heinrich, Steffie, Denise, and Wilder. Their monotonous and ordinary lives change dramatically with the airborne toxic event which happens after a train car derails and starts to release toxic gases after the accident. The novel has two different narratives one of which is the airborne toxic event and the other is a psycho-pharmaceutical on trial stage which is called Dylar. The connection between the two narratives is that Jack Gladney decides to use Dylar because of his pathological fear of death which he developed after the airborne toxic event. Shortly, the lives of the characters in *White Noise* are shaped by a material event, which shows the strength of the matter on the human world.

3. MATERIAL AGENCY AND TRANS-CORPOREALITY IN *WHITE NOISE*

It is possible to claim that toxicity grows bigger by giving way to other toxic issues in *White Noise* because the trauma Jack Gladney experiences stems from the airborne toxic event and, as a result, Gladney uses Dylar to cope with his post-traumatic stress, which is also a toxic drug.

The toxin Nyodene D., which is a byproduct of the airborne toxic event has multifaceted harm on nature and people and other life forms as it contaminates the soil, causes health problems in people and kills animals and this exemplifies the term trans-corporeality. Another very important issue that the novel mentions is that the toxin Nyodene D. has a lifespan of forty years in soil and thirty years in the human body, which is a very solid example of transcorporeality as it proves that toxicity has an impact on human and non-human bodies, although the effect mechanisms might have different duration. This example demonstrates that the human body and non-human bodies are similar and superiority or inferiority is out of the question. The fact that the airborne toxic event, which is thoroughly an act of non-human agencies, causes significant events proves that material forces can make things happen. One of the results of the airborne toxic event is the evacuation which forces people to leave their homes. That is to say, the human agentic capacity of the event is so strong that it deprives people of their homes. Hence, one single event affects people's lives dramatically and devastates their lives. People have to change their locations, sometimes live in a barracks under quarantine. Because of the wind, the direction of the toxic cloud changes, people have to settle in different places while they escape from the cloud. The toxic cloud causes the same problems where the wind drifts over it. The fact that the toxic cloud moves regardless of human will befits the material agency principal, which considers toxicity as a mobile and agentic force. It is clear that a train derailment causes the airborne toxic event and, due to a hole on the train car, toxic material starts to release, and the toxic cloud is carried away by the wind, and the toxicity grows bigger and thus, has a massive impact on people and other life forms. In other words, people's lives could have been completely different unless the toxic event had not occurred, and this shows the great importance of material agency.

Sullivan makes a definition of toxicity in modern life and its components and offers a sound answer for the question why toxicity is mobile and contagious by stating that "we exist in a diaspora of granular minerals, particulate matter, and organic odds and ends that find their way into our soil and elsewhere, too" (2012, 516). Sullivan's theory enables us to explain why the evacuation cannot suffice and succeed in providing people with sterilized media.

On the other hand, the symptoms seen in people are numerous and vary from person to person. Age factor, gender factor, and various factors were active in this process. However, there were not persistent symptoms. This fact also exemplifies the term material agency. "Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants" are the outcomes of the toxic event (DeLillo, 2011, 174). "Nerve disorders, strange and violent behavior in the home" are the psychological effects of the event on people (DeLillo, 2011, 175). Thus, the toxic event causes numerous disorders both mentally and physically and causes hazards on people, the land, and other life forms.

The human-centered perception which associates agency with intentionality and therefore with human intelligence and the denial of the fact that material objects have their own agencies intend to "absolve matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism" (Bennett, 2010, 3). As Iovino and Opperman have put it in "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity," in fact "the true dimension of the matter is not that of a static and passive substance or being, but of a generative becoming." (Iovino and Opperman, 2012, 77). Therefore, it can be easily understood how the matter creates dramatic changes in the process of events throughout *White Noise*. The quote explains how material processes actively



take part in the making of the plot in *White Noise*. In *White Noise*, the matter becomes a “generative becoming.”

White Noise reveals how harsh urbanization, capitalism, and industrialization can be in modern life and the outcomes of all these conditions and their short/medium/long term consequences. This novel is significant because it reveals the consumerism and techno-mania of the 80s and the unplanned and random industrialization. The industrialization in *White Noise* is not one that is useful for the people; just the contrary, it has huge negative impacts on the environment and all the bodies in the environment are negatively affected by it. As Cynthia Dietering mentions in “The Post-natural Novel: Toxic Consciousness In The Fiction Of The 1980's” the 1980s witnessed industrial and nuclear accidents, and this gave way to awareness and consciousness in fiction and toxicity became an important theme in environmental literature (Dietering, 1996, 196). According to Dietering, “*White Noise*...depicts a society whose most distinguishable feature is its waste,” which this study totally agrees (1996, 197). Toxicity is not an individual incident; it has dramatic effects on all the surrounding area and is transmitting and mobile. The airborne toxic event has an unprecedented amount of harm on people, animals, and the land. The airborne toxic event causes psychological problems as well as physical ones. The airborne toxic event creates a pathological fear of death, which causes Gladney to be addicted to Dylar. The characters in *White Noise* experience a deep trauma during the airborne toxic event and the post-traumatic stress is very apparent within the society. The characters keep posing the question who will die first and this question becomes an important issue in the novel, which is a symptom of the post-traumatic stress the characters experience in the aftermath of the airborne toxic event. People experience both psychical and psychological problems simultaneously. For instance, people suffer from scarcity food because of the airborne toxic event, and many people die because of toxicity. Because of post-traumatic stress and fear of death, Jack Gladney becomes addicted to Dylar hoping that he can overcome his obsession with the help of Dylar and; however, the addiction itself becomes a bigger problem than the obsession with the idea of death. Dylar is still in a trial stage and it has dangerous side effects and might cause “outright death, brain death, left brain death, partial paralysis, other cruel and bizarre conditions of the body and the mind” and it can be deduced that the drug is toxic to the mind and body simultaneously (DeLillo, 2011, 251). The contamination in the aftermath of the event is so strong that it poisons people's bodies and heavy metals are found in blood samples of people. At the same time, it is seen that people lose their will to live and wish for death. Simultaneously. People suffer from physical and psychological illnesses due to the airborne toxic event.

DeLillo points out the anthropocentric irony of being human. For DeLillo, human-beings' delusion of seeing themselves as “the highest form of life on earth” is ridiculous (DeLillo, 2011,99). “The irony of human existence,” for DeLillo, is to believe “that we are the highest form of life on earth and yet [feel] ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die” (DeLillo, 2011,99). While commenting on Attila the Hun's death, DeLillo, through the character of Jack Gladney, makes a striking definition of death. “That pathetic flea-ridden beast is better off than the greatest ruler of men. It doesn't know what we know; it doesn't feel what we feel, it can't be sad as we are sad” (DeLillo, 2011,100). The scene portrays the ironical situation of humanity in which the very thing human-beings are proud of, their wisdom, enables them to understand that they are going to die. For DeLillo, this knowledge is the irony of being human, and the stance of DeLillo is arguably anti-anthropocentric. Another point to infer from this quotation is that DeLillo draws a parallelism between the human and non-human animals by stating no other (non-human) animal knows the fact what the human (animal) knows. Therefore, DeLillo makes a comparison between the human and the non-human world.

4. As Stacy Alaimo has stated, “bracketing the biological body, and thereby severing its evolutionary, historical, and ongoing interconnections with the material world, may not be ethically, politically, or theoretically desirable” (Alaimo, 2010, 3). Hence, the biological and psychological symptoms seen in the characters of *White Noise* are not individual events, on the contrary, the background, the aftermath of the events and their interconnections with other events are evident. At that point, Alaimo offers an alternative. According to Alaimo “trans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is where corporeal theories, environmental theories, and science studies meet and mingle in productive ways” (Alaimo, 2010, 3). That is why the biological, environmental, political, economic and sociological aspects of events need to be considered as a whole. Trans-corporeality does not only see the human as part of the natural world but also as part of the material world. As



Alaimo points out, "trans-corporeality, as a descendant of Darwinism, insists that the human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world" (Alaimo, 2010, 11). Therefore, the so-called privileged position of human beings in the world is questionable. Human beings think they possess the world; however, the reality is that human beings are only a part of the ecosystem.

4. THE AIRBORNE TOXIC EVENT

The airborne toxic event is the central issue in the novel. It is so strong an issue that changes people's lives and the environment in such a way that cannot be repaired. This dramatic change is an example of material agency. "The radio said a tank car derailed. But I don't think it derailed from what I could see. I think it got rammed and something punched a hole in it. There's a lot of smoke, and I don't like the looks of it" (DeLillo, 2011, 110). People are unable to comprehend the existence of material agency as they tend to believe that a certain incident must have caused the derailment and that derailment must have caused the hole, however, according to material agency principle, there is a possibility that the derailment was caused by the intra-actions of materials, which is unknown to the human comprehensive abilities. The endeavor to express the incident within the framework of logic is futile and contrary to material agency principle. It is stated that the substance must be "explosive and toxic" (DeLillo, 2011, 110). The chemical gas that is released after the toxic event is called Nyodene D. and it is toxic waste. It is said to cause lumps' development in rats. However, the effect on human-beings is uncertain, and further research is necessary to comment on the possible results of Nyodene D. contamination and intoxication. Thus, this uncertainty proves the concept of "material agency" in *White Noise*. Nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, skin irritation and sweaty palms are the symptoms that develop after Nyodene D exposure. However, these are temporary symptoms rather than definitive results. Therefore, they are unable to give information about the hazards of Nyodene D. The toxin affects the human mind and gradually, new symptoms come out, and this proves that material agency of Nyodene D works in a way in which the results are unpredictable.

The airborne toxic event causes a significant amount of noise pollution both as the event takes places and as people send signals to inform people. The noise pollution is also detrimental to health, especially psychological health and ear health.

Air-raid sirens sounded again, this time so close to us that we were negatively affected, shaken to the point of avoiding each other's eyes as a way of denying that something unusual was going on. The sound came from our own red brick firehouse, sirens that hadn't been tested in a decade or more. They made a noise like some territorial squawk from out of the Mesozoic. A parrot carnivore with a DC-9 wingspan. What a raucousness of brute aggression filled the house, making it seem as though the walls would fly apart. So close to us, so surely upon us. Amazing to think this sonic monster lay hidden nearby for years. (DeLillo, 2011, 118)

The institutions established in order to predict, prevent and aid in these events do not seem to work properly. Another one of these institutions is the "chemical detention center in a remote part of New Mexico" (126). In the center, people train dogs to sniff out Nyodene D. They aim at making use of the trained dogs to prevent Nyodene D exposure. However, throughout the novel, one cannot see proof that this center works effectively. On the other hand, again in accord with the principle of "material agency," the symptoms of Nyodene D exposure change gradually, for instance, at one point it is stated that "*Déjà vu*, however, was no longer a working symptom of Nyodene contamination. It had been preempted by coma, convulsions, and miscarriage" (DeLillo, 2011, 125). The fact that the symptoms change in a process can be said to exemplify "intra-action" because when human bodies and toxic bodies intermingle, each one bears new results.

The airborne toxic event is a turning point in the novel. The airborne toxic event takes place very unexpectedly and immediately. Heinrich, the son of Jack Gladney, realizes that a cloud of smoke is rising into the sky. It is caused by the derailment of a train car which later starts burning, releasing a toxic material. The toxin which is released after the airborne toxic event is called Nyodene D. and it is presented in the novel as a lethal toxin. "Trans-corporeality not only traces how various substances travel across and within the human body but how they *do things*" (Alaimo, 2010, 146). According to this principle, one must observe the changes in human bodies that toxicity causes in human and non-human bodies. Therefore, within trans-corporeality principle, the airborne toxic event must be studied thoroughly in relation to how the toxicity travels across and



within bodies and what consequences it bears.

5. THE AFTERMATH IN OF THE DISASTER

In the novel, the whole setting is represented as toxic and contaminated, and the rapidly growing capitalism can be seen as the source of toxicity. People's lives are dramatically affected by toxicity. People's state of being stuck between their endeavors to adapt to the new capitalistic economy and returning to spirituality is embodied in Mother Devi.

Heinrich's mother lives in an ashram ... She has taken the name Mother Devi and runs the business end of things. The ashram is located on the outskirts of the former copper-smelting town of Tubb, Montana, now called Dharamsalapur. The usual rumors abound of sexual freedom, sexual slavery, drugs, nudity, mind control, poor hygiene, tax evasion, monkey-worship, torture, prolonged and hideous death. (DeLillo, 2011, 24)

It is arguably a contradiction that an ashram, which stands for spiritual healing, is located in a toxic former copper-smelting site. This contradiction can be considered to be purposeful because DeLillo might have intended to point out the fact that 'spiritual healing' is out of the question unless a physical betterment of the toxic area takes place. At the same time, it is stated that people suffer from prolonged and hideous deaths, which must be closely related to copper-smelting because copper-smelting is arguably carcinogenic and toxic. It is widely agreed that the soil is the central entity in toxicity as toxic material initially contaminates. As the second step, the soil which is contaminated pollutes the drinking water, and with the consumption of the drinking water and the food which is grown in the toxic soil, people consume toxic materials into their bodies which causes health issues. The toxicity affects people inevitably because the human body is not independent of other entities. As Karen Barad mentions, human beings are not separate from their environment or independent of other bodies because "human bodies, like all other bodies, are not entities with inherent boundaries and properties but phenomena that acquire specific boundaries and properties through the open-ended dynamics of intra-activity. Humans are part of the world-body space in its dynamic structuration" (*Meeting The Universe Halfway*, 172). Contrary to mainstream understanding, which sees humans as the wise and privileged supreme beings and the owners of nature, nature does not exist for the favor of human existence, on the contrary, the world humans share with other corporeal beings is in a continuous interaction in which human beings are only a part of the process.

The evacuation is the most critical change in people's lives which the airborne toxic event causes. The toxic event bore drastic results for people and deprived them of their homes.

They had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday. Kids were getting headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths. A teacher rolled on the floor and spoke foreign languages. No one knew what was wrong. Investigators said it could be the ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electrical insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by microcomputers, the asbestos fireproofing, the adhesive on shipping containers, the fumes from the chlorinated pool, or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things. (DeLillo, 2011, 35)

"Headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in...mouths" are the physical symptoms and the teacher's rolling on the floor speaking a foreign language is a psychological abnormality (DeLillo, 2011, 35). The symptoms seen in people differ in numerous ways. Age factor, gender factor, and various factors were active in this process. However, the peculiar aspect of this was that there were not constant symptoms. Toxicity is agentic in itself and works independently and does not yield consistent results. That is to say, once a toxic event takes place, the results are merely unpredictable. Thus, the endeavor to predict and prevent the outcomes of toxicity is irrational.

The alienated and detached state of the human from nature is highlighted throughout the novel. The only place where natural products can be seen is the supermarket in the novel. In a certain sense, nature and human-beings are represented as foreign, detached, and even contrary to each other and this can be considered as the very source of the absence of a balance. Within an anthropocentric framework, human-beings tend to think that nature is a gift bestowed upon them, and is contrary to the culture and needs to be



tamed for the service of human beings.

Murray Jay Siskind character is the embodiment of a combination of nature and culture. Siskind is a faculty member of "popular culture department, known officially as American environments" (DeLillo, 2011, 9). He makes researches in order to "to decipher the natural language of the culture" and works on an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles" (DeLillo, 2011, 9). That is to say, in the character of Siskind, language, culture, nature, prosthetic, artificial and natural beings intermingle. DeLillo debugs nature/culture dichotomy in a very far-sighted manner via the character of Siskind. The binary is reduced to a minimum level when Siskind offers to visit "the most photographed barn in America" (DeLillo, 2011, 9). As in the so-called nature/culture dichotomy, which is overcome by mingling each, the natural state of the barn and the artificiality of photography and the mechanized state of the "forty cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot" intermingle (DeLillo, 2011, 12). In fact that DeLillo created such a character at a time when nature and culture were seen as two different, split, and contradictory terms is highly meaningful and revolutionary.

Modern life becomes a matter of what to take and what not to take inside our bodies. Our consumption determines our well-being. The materials people consume have agencies that cause effects and side effects. This fact is clearly expressed by Jack Gladney when he is asked about the possible reasons for his oblivion. "Either I'm taking something and I don't remember, or I'm not taking something, and I don't remember. My life is either/or. Either I chew regular gum, or I chew sugarless gum. Either I chew gum, or I smoke. Either I smoke, or I gain weight. Either I gain weight, or I run up the stadium steps" (DeLillo, 2011, 53). Certainly, Jack Gladney's forgetfulness, the constant fear of death and déjàvu's are related more to toxic contamination than to psychological trauma. On the other hand, although Jack Gladney tends to deny, the symptoms are the side effects of Dylar.

It is certain that disasters are not preventable, especially disasters caused by humans have a stronger impact on nature. The attempts to predict, prevent and control human-made disasters are futile because, in accord with the "material agency" principle, materials have agencies of their own and, therefore, it is not possible to predict what kind of effects they might bring about. The state of uncertainty of the scientists about the possible side effects of the chemical substance Nyodene D. proves this argument. On the other hand, "nuclear readiness foundation," which is "a legal defense fund for the industry" is mentioned in the novel (DeLillo, 2011, 56). Although there is such an institution which aims to help people to get rid of the effects of a nuclear event, throughout the novel, not a single incident can be traced which enables the reader to see the effectiveness of the institution. This event also strengthens the argument that materials have agencies of their own and they act independently, in an unpredictable way.

Noise pollution is an inevitable outcome of urban life; thus, urban life is represented as a medium of life in a race, a life with plenty of noise and people cramped in shopping malls. The city is associated with noise, hurry, consumer society and modernization in a negative way. The city is represented as being toxic in *White Noise*, and dirt, waste and noise pollution are the characteristics of the city, which is visible in the definitions of the city. "Voices rose ten stories from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery, mixing with noises from the tiers, with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction" (DeLillo, 2011, 84). This quote portrays a world full of noise pollution. The novel has, quite overtly, an anti-urban stance. Hence, the disasters people have become face to face with are all human-made disasters which were caused by urbanization; thus, urbanization is a threat, and rural life is more in harmony in harmony with, or, at least, more respectful to nature. "It is the nature and pleasure of townspeople to distrust the city. All the guiding principles that might flow from a center of ideas and cultural energies are regarded as corrupt, one or another kind of pornography. This is how it is with towns" (DeLillo, 2011, 85). The comparison between town life and city life is made in the novel and, arguably, town life is more preferable and the stance of townspeople becomes, in a certain sense, the stance of the novel.

The sight of Babette on TV is represented as an accumulated sum of waves and radiation, which is a material activity rather than a human perception.

She was shining a light on us, she was coming into being, endlessly being formed and reformed as the muscles in her face worked at smiling and speaking, as the electronic dots swarmed. We were being



shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us. Babette of electrons and photons, of whatever forces, produced that gray light we took to be her face. (DeLillo, 2011, 104-105)

This exemplifies how intra-actions take place within human bodies. The rays of the television are received by the human eye and are transferred to the brain and via signals from the brain, the vision is received. Thus, the process called intra-action is a very common process in daily life.

After the airborne toxic event takes place, a massive cloud appears in the sky. It is drifted randomly by the wind and creates a horrifying atmosphere. The enormity of the black cloud is expressed as follows:

The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings. We weren't sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content. But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event, like the vivid scene in the switching yard or the people trudging across the snowy overpass with children, food, belongings, a tragic army of the dispossessed. Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms. This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event. (DeLillo, 2011, 127)

In the above paragraph, the concepts of material agency, toxicity, natural, unnatural human-made disasters are seen and, in terms of an ecocritical approach, it is possible to trace the shift between the concepts natural/cultural and controllable- uncontrollable. Human-made disasters are arguably more harmful to all of the bodies in the natural environment because in human-made disasters, chemicals which are not supposed to collide under natural conditions amalgamate. Hence, in this example, it is seen that such dangerous toxins as chlorides, benzines, phenols and hydrocarbons release as a result of the disaster. The dichotomy between these significant issues becomes the fundamental discourse in the novel. Whenever the people try to put toxicity under control, the endeavor does not yield a specific result. They try to balance the hazardous chemical through deactivating it with useful material. They pour soda ash and sodium bicarbonate onto the train yard; however, no specific result can be seen to do away with the toxicity. This fact again exemplifies the terms 'material agency' and 'trans-corporeality' in neither of which the matter is seen as a controllable entity. Human beings have not been able to learn how materials act, intra-act, and interact, however, they tend to master on the matter and render it as being under their control. This is an anthropocentric point of view and is utterly flawed. It is not yet clear whether the agencies of the matter are knowable or not. Accordingly, Nyodene D. does not have a specific antidote and is not deactivated by another material because "Nyodene D. is a whole bunch of things thrown together that are byproducts of the manufacture of insecticide. The original stuff kills roaches; the byproducts kill everything left over" (DeLillo, 2011, 131). The term byproduct signifies an intra-active agentic force of the materials thrown together, and arguably, the mixture of materials yield an unwanted and unpredictable result. On a different level, people attempt to cope with toxicity by means of microorganisms; however, as befitting the concept of "material agency," the results of the microorganism attack are uncertain because "no one seemed to know how a group of microorganisms could consume enough toxic material to rid the sky of such a dense and enormous cloud. No one knew what would happen to the toxic waste once it was eaten or to the microorganisms, once they were finished eating" (DeLillo, 2011, 160). The idea behind this is that a material can selectively deactivate another material. Scientists have been claiming control over materials; however, materials do not work under the control of human knowledge, on the contrary, they have their abilities to act autonomously, which is called 'material agency.' According to Sullivan, "dirt and dust can be highly toxic or radioactive, and thus can impose a destructively agentic influence onto most of the living things they contact" (2012, 516). In *White Noise*, Nyodene D. contaminates the soil, harms people and animals. In order to determine the effects of Nyodene D., a span of fifteen years is required. Fifteen years under psychological turmoil causes post-traumatic neurosis in Jack, which makes itself manifest as a fear of death. The toxin has a lifespan of forty



years in soil and thirty years in the human body. Thus, it has different effects on different life forms and organisms. On the other hand, one of the results of the airborne toxic event is the evacuation. This tragic event is expressed in the novel as follows:

Forced out of our homes, sent streaming into the bitter night, pursued by a toxic cloud, crammed together in makeshift quarters, ambiguously death-sentenced. We'd become part of the public stuff of media disaster. The small audience of the old and blind recognized the predictions of the psychics as events so near to happening that they had to be shaped in advance to our needs and wishes. Out of some persistent sense of large-scale ruin, we kept inventing hope.(DeLillo, 2011, 146-147)

Hence, it would be right to say that a momentary event affected people's lives dramatically and caused irreversible consequences in their lives. The airborne toxic event has the sole responsibility in depriving people of their homes. People have to leave their homes, change their locations, sometimes live in barracks under quarantine. Due to the wind effect, the toxic cloud changes its direction; people are sprinkled in different places while they escape from the cloud. The event puts people under harsh conditions. The effects of the event on people regarding psychological and physical health problems are innumerable. It is not a coincidence that the toxic cloud causes the same problems in the place where the cloud is drifted by the rain because, in material ecocriticism, the contaminated media are seen as mobile and agentic.

6. SULLIVAN'S "DIRT THEORY" AND ITS RELEVANCE WITH *WHITE NOISE*

Sullivan states the mobility of dirt and waste in his as follows:

With dirt theory, one cannot focus solely on "place" since the small-scale earth-forms of dirt, dust, and sand are highly mobile aspects of our material surroundings. They move with us on our shoes and bodies, are moved by elemental forces like wind and water, and are dispersed by mechanized means of travel. Rather than concentrating solely on "place," then, dirt theory acknowledges ongoing processes through time and across space. (2012, 516)

Thus, Sullivan's "dirt theory" can be applied to DeLillo's *White Noise*. It is clear that a train derailment caused the airborne toxic event and, due to a hole in the train car, the toxic material started to release from the accident and the toxic cloud was carried away by the wind and the contaminated media grew bigger and thus had a massive impact on people and other life forms. In addition, Sullivan makes a definition of toxicity in modern life and its components and offers a sound answer for the question of why toxicity is mobile and contagious as follows: "Th(e) mobile hybridity is not only due to dirt's ability to travel but also is a result of its actual components" (2012, 516). Sullivan's theory is thoroughly applicable to *White Noise* and it enables us to explain why the evacuation cannot suffice and succeed in providing people with sterilized media.

7. PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE DISASTER

Jack Gladney suffers from an obsessive fear of death and a state of hypochondria after the airborne toxic event. Jack Gladney expresses how psychologically devastating the event was by saying "a little breath of Nyodene D has planted a death in my body" (DeLillo, 2011, 150). This expression can be considered a good example of trans-corporeality as the toxic substance has affected Jack Gladney both physically and psychologically after having entered his body. The expression "death is in the air" while mentioning the toxic event and its aftermath reminds the reader of the fact that the fear of death Jack Gladney experiences is not irrational. A connection between toxic contamination and déjàvu is made. Toxicity and déjàvu are mutually related. Because the toxicity is lethal, people can experience fear of death when an event reminds them of death. This is the reason why Jack is traumatized and obsessed with the feeling of death. The airborne toxic event does not only have physical impacts on people and living things, but it also has more psychological impacts on people. Jack Gladney finds himself unable to find solace in anything, the parents try to hide the importance of the toxicity from their children, there is a constant effort to cope with the event both physically and psychologically. People start to awe the massive event, they try to express to the event through religion. Jack finds himself skeptical about religion. These psychological changes and turmoils are all the outcomes of the airborne toxic event, and in terms of material agency, the consequences are unpredictable as materials have agencies of their own.



The airborne toxic event causes illnesses, psychological disorders, and deaths. The number of casualties is high. Three of the live deer at the Kung Fu Palace were dead. The governor was dead, his pilot and co-pilot seriously injured after a crash landing in a shopping mall. Two of the men at the switching yard were dead, tiny acid burns visible in their Mylex suits. Packs of German shepherds, the Nyodene-sniffing dogs, had shed their parachutes and were being set loose in the affected communities. There was a rash of UFO sightings in the area. There was widespread looting by men in plastic sheets. Two' looters were dead. Six National Guardsmen were dead, killed in a firefight that broke out after a racial incident. There were reports of miscarriages, babies born prematurely. There were sightings of additional billowing clouds (DeLillo, 2011, 153). It is clearly seen that the chemical toxin Nyodene D. is hazardous to all life forms.

The toxicity is a recurrent issue throughout the novel. It is not an event that happens at one time and disappears. Its effects also bear similar characteristics. The effects reoccur, change shape and vary. "Every day on the news there's another toxic spill" (DeLillo, 2011, 174). The people's shock towards the fact that concurrent toxic events occur and their tendency to disbelieve is clearly seen when Babette says "isn't the definition of a serious event based on the fact that it's not an everyday occurrence?" (DeLillo, 2011, 174). However, the fact that an event takes place on a regular basis does not mean it is a petty occurrence. On the contrary, toxicity is a process of intra-actions of chemically hazardous materials which occur on a regular basis, and utmost attention must be paid to toxicity as it is a chemical process that kills human and non-human bodies in the long run.

The novel *White Noise* puts forth the adverse effects of urbanization, capitalism, industrialization, modern life, city life and the inevitable consequences of all these factors. The hazards given to nature directly affect the people living in it. Human beings are affected by the disasters they create themselves. This novel is essential in terms of enabling to analyze American environmental literature in the eighties as the eighties is a transition time to rapid modernization and applying modernization to the society without sufficient researches is prone to danger. Before the train car accident, there is not a single mentioning of the train car and the rail system and the derailment can be considered to have stemmed from unpreparedness or lack of prevention.

DeLillo highlights that the "modern" post-traumatic world has nothing to offer to heal the wounds of a technology that has derailed and refers to the artificiality of the world which has detached from nature by saying "everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead" (DeLillo, 2011, 326). The tabloid racks exhibit canned and tinned factory products which are unnatural, highly chemical, and ironically are claimed to be miracle cures. They altogether stand for popular culture and a capitalistic economy in which consumption is seen as being remedial.

The quarantine makes the characters in the novel lead a more isolated life dependent on television and other media devices. Therefore, the airborne toxic event not only affects people in physical ways but also affects them psychologically. After having escaped from their homes in order to avoid chemical poisoning, they settle in Iron City as evacuees along with the other inhabitants of Blacksmith. They see "a man carrying a tiny TV set (begin) to walk slowly through the room, making a speech as he went" (DeLillo, 2011, 161). This event shows how tragically the people are longing for a piece of news to soothe them and, at the same time, the behaviors of people become highly abnormal and the post-traumatic stress becomes a threat itself. The characters' seeking solace in being televised is ironical. As Duvall states "because the evacuees are attuned to the forms, genres, and, in fact, the larger aesthetics of television, they experience a lack, a sense of emptiness" (1996, 130). As the evacuees have been informed about the toxic event primarily via television, they feel the necessity to be informed about the cure of the event via television, too. This example puts forth its helplessness in the post-traumatic world. Television, at that point, represents the transmitter of reality; however, it could well represent the unreal; that is why television becomes the simulacrum of reality.

CONCLUSION

As Alaimo states, "trans-corporeality denies the human subject the sovereign, central position. Instead, ethical considerations and practices must emerge from a more uncomfortable and perplexing place where the "human" is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world" (Alaimo, 2010, 16-17). This idea is applicable to the environmental disaster in *White Noise* as the characters' ideas reflect anthropocentrism to the fullest, however, in the end, it is proven that disasters are unpredictable and uncontrollable and, once they



happen, they cannot be eliminated, their hazards cannot be eased and, unlike Gladney thinks, disasters can happen to anyone regardless of gender, race or class. That is why Gladney is wrong to think that a college professor is not prone to environmental disasters. Gladney claims that "these things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it is the poor and uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters" (DeLillo, 2011, 30). Jack Gladney's understanding of class is hierarchical. He also claims that "people in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornadoes. I am a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?" (DeLillo, 2011, 30) However, Gladney reaches bitter enlightenment after the airborne toxic event and understands that disasters can happen to anyone.

Transcorporeality sees the human body as part of the environment constituting of various bodies; hence, it should not be forgotten that the hazard given to the environment are the hazard given to one's self. "Environmental justice movements epitomize trans-corporeal materiality, a conception of the body that is neither essentialist, nor genetically determined, nor firmly bounded, but rather a body in which social power and material/geographic agencies intra-act" (Alaimo, 2010, 63). The idea that toxicity can only be harmful to non-human bodies as they cannot develop methods to cope with it and that human beings as so-called "thinking animals" can cope with toxicity using his "superior" scientific knowledge is questioned in *White Noise*. Generally speaking, toxicity does not differentiate between human or non-human. As was mentioned before, within the understanding of trans-corporeality, all entities are not only a part of but are also a component of the bio-community. Hence, toxicity harms the whole conglomerate of life forms to various degrees.

According to Terry Gifford, "ecocriticism is concerned not only with the attitude to nature expressed by the author of a text but also with its patterns of interrelatedness, both between the human and the non-human and between the different parts of the non-human world" (1999, 5). Therefore, "the intra-actions" (as Barad has named them) gain a discursive quality according to Gifford. This principle is highly applicable to DeLillo's *White Noise*. In *White Noise*, the intra-actions of materials are not only active but are "actants" at the same time. The airborne toxic event, toxicity, toxicity related health issues do not only affect people's lives, they determine and shape people's lives. It is certain that people's lives would have been different unless the airborne toxic event had not happened. Jane Bennet refers to the fact that human and non-human agencies have come to embrace each other by stating that "there was never a time when the human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and non-humanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore" (2010, 31). Bennet also presents an explanation for the ambiguity of non-human agencies. As has been mentioned before, the material agency is unpredictable and cannot be taken under control. The autonomy of material agencies is described by Bennet as follows:

No one really knows what human agency is or what humans are doing when they are said to perform as agents. In the face of every analysis, human agency remains something of a mystery. If we do not know just how it is that human agency operates, how can we be so sure that the processes through which non-humans make their mark are qualitatively different? (2010, 34)

In conclusion, *White Noise* demonstrates how the material agency can play an active role in determining events, creating stories and bearing results. Therefore, the agentic capacity of the matter should never be ignored. As the novel has shown, the idea that human beings are superior and have the power to make things happen can lead human beings to frustration just as it did to Jack Gladney. Material agency is unpredictable and cannot be taken under control; it is autonomous and, As Bennet put it, "no one knows what human agency is or what humans are doing when they are said to perform as agents. In the face of every analysis, the human agency remains something of a mystery" (2010, 34). Therefore, if human beings cannot thoroughly know human agencies, it is nonsensical to claim knowledge of material agencies.

REFERENCES

- Alaimo, Stacy (2010). *Bodily Natures Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington& Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
Barad, Karen Michelle (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham& London: Duke University Press.
Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*. Durham& London: Duke University Press.
DeLillo, Don (2011). *White Noise*. London: Picador.



- Dietering, Cynthia (1996). The Post-Natural Novel: Toxic Consciousness In The Fiction Of The 1980s. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens& London: University of Georgia Press.
- Duvall, John N. (1994). The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*. *The Arizona Quarterly*, S. 50, No. 3-4, S.127-153.
- Gifford, Terry (1999). *Pastoral*. London& New York: Routledge.
- Iovino, Serenella, Oppermann, Serpil. Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency and Models of Narrativity. *Ecozona*, S.3, No.1, s.75-91.
- Sullivan, H.I. (2012). Dirt theory and material ecocriticism. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, s 19(3), s 515-531.